

TURBULENCE IN MANCHESTER

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The season just ended could hardly have been more different for Manchester's two football clubs. United topped the Premiership for the third season in a row and the seventh in nine years while City slumped to relegation after just one season back in the top flight.

Yet the two clubs suddenly had something in common as managerial intrigue at both dominated the headlines during the last ten days.

On the eve of the final match of the season, United manager Sir Alex Ferguson stunned football by announcing that he would be severing all ties with the club when he retires at the end of next season. Both Ferguson and the Board had previously said that he would continue at Old Trafford probably in an ambassadorial role after stepping down from first team managerial duties in May 2002.

Apparently, however, some directors (either at the football club or the PLC) are unhappy at the prospect of Ferguson remaining in the background when a new manager is appointed. They argue that Ferguson's presence would cast a giant shadow, inhibiting the new man and possibly undermining his authority. Reports that Ferguson is seeking an annual salary of £1 million (12 million yuan) for his ambassadorial duties which the club feel might only involve about 30 days per year reinforced the position of these dissenting directors. The club was preparing to offer Ferguson around £100,000, which Sir Alex clearly feels betrays a lack of appreciation.

Another factor in the equation is the club's view that they must seek another high profile manager to succeed Ferguson. In many ways this makes perfect sense; but Ferguson's recommendation as the next manager is his current assistant, Steve McLaren.

One of the consequences of the week's developments is that the ambitious McLaren, convinced the Board will not give him the chance to succeed Ferguson, is leaving. He was offered and was tempted by the managerial vacancy at West Ham; but at the time of writing McLaren looks set to accept the job at Middlesbrough.

McLaren's imminent departure has added to Ferguson's sense of disappointment with the United Board. But his contract runs until May 2002, and he says he will honour it, despite intense speculation that he may walk out before the start of next season – and even accept an offer to manage another club. Barcelona are known to admire his achievements.

While it is true that no individual is bigger than the club, Ferguson can justifiably claim to have made Manchester United the world's wealthiest club by bringing them consistent success on the pitch. He has every reason to resent the comment from one anonymous director, who said, 'Fergie doesn't sell any shirts' – a reference to the substantial marketing power of the United brand.

Meanwhile players like David Beckham, currently negotiating a new contract with United, are inclined to wait and see what happens before committing themselves. Like others in the current squad, Beckham acknowledges the career debt he owes to Ferguson. He hopes and expects that Fergie will see out the remaining year of his contract at Old Trafford.

Most United fans are outraged at what they perceive as the Board's ingratitude to Ferguson. The typical view is that the club should offer him whatever he wants rather than let him sever all ties in an acrimonious parting. United director and ex-player Bobby Charlton insists that Ferguson will not leave, that a solution will be found and that Ferguson's contribution is fully appreciated by the Board.

The final outcome remains to be seen. But three things are certain. The first is that this episode has been another public relations disaster for Manchester United. The second is that Ferguson's relationship with the club has been damaged. And the third is that United must recruit a new assistant manager even before they consider replacing Fergie.

The question of managerial succession also loomed large last week at Maine Road, home of United's neighbours Manchester City. Having already accepted relegation, it was a surprise when, just a few days later, City chairman David Bernstein announced the sacking of manager Joe Royle. Ironically, since becoming chairman, Bernstein had consistently stressed the importance of stability.

But he revealed last week that – following lengthy discussions with Royle the manager and club clearly did not agree on several fundamental issues. Inevitably Royle, his position weakened by the team's failure on the pitch, became the Premiership's latest high-profile casualty.

Amazingly, his dismissal was immediately followed by revelations from unnamed players that a drinking culture existed at Maine Road, and that Royle had allowed an unprofessional and indisciplined situation to develop. Royle refuted these insinuations and expressed his disappointment that anyone should concoct such unfounded stories. But while he pondered his next move (retirement or re-appointment as a manager with another club), City were busily implementing plans to secure a successor.

Immediate favourites for the Maine Road hot-seat included Peter Reid (a previous City manager but now securely placed at ambitious Sunderland); Steve McLaren (known to be looking beyond Old Trafford); Mick McCarthy (successfully guiding the Republic of Ireland towards World Cup qualification); George Graham (currently without a club but with a good managerial track record); and even cheekily Sir Alex Ferguson.

It was therefore a surprise when City revealed on Friday that they had offered the job to Kevin Keegan, who had promptly accepted. At the post-appointment press conference, Keegan enthused about the opportunity he'd been given. He likened it to the challenge he'd taken on at Newcastle, with whom he initially enjoyed considerable success. Similar success had followed when Keegan took over at Fulham. Now, however, he faces a huge challenge.

His motivational powers will be fully tested at Maine Road. The club had an abysmal home record last season, a key factor in their relegation. The squad needs strengthening in several positions, while a lot of dead wood needs to be removed from the playing staff. Yet with the club moving to a new, purpose-built stadium in 18 months' time, and with the backing of a huge and loyal fan-base, City are confident about their future prospects.

Keegan has signed a five-year contract, underlining his commitment to the new challenge and ironically reinforcing Bernstein's view that stability is important at the club. Keegan's first task will be to bring City back up into the Premiership next season; after that comes the hard part – keeping them there.

Despite his self-confessed failure at international level in the England job, Keegan says he feels refreshed and full of enthusiasm. As City's 19th manager in 30 years, he will need all his considerable drive – plus good judgement, tactical vision and plenty of luck – if he is to succeed in reawakening this sleeping giant in a city where United's success has thrown City's failings into even sharper relief.